

Youthful drive leads to a life of foster parenting

Maria Levengood, of Farmer City, can count on the double-take reactions she gets when she is with her 19-year-old adopted daughter. Aunt or older sister are the typical guesses that come to mind before mother. She is used to it now, as her career in foster care started when she was just 21 in 1988. After seeing a couple in her church parent youth with special needs, Levengood, though young and single, decided she wanted to be a foster parent, too. Since that time she has cared for more than 50 children and completed three adoptions, in addition to raising her two children by birth.

Her resolve to begin foster parenting so young surprised those around her.

"I thought 'you don't know what you are getting into,' but have seen her grow in knowledge and wisdom...weaving it all together with understanding and love," said Marie Whiteside, a friend since Levengood started in foster care.

Now, she and her husband of four years manage an active household with children ranging in age from 19, 17, 14, 7, and 3 to a one year old in foster care. Just looking around her own home, she can always find something to share with other caregivers in her outside job

as a DCFS Foster Parent Support Specialist. In that role, she is called upon to mentor more than 50 families in the DCFS Central Region foster parent program who live in DeWitt, McLean and Livingston counties. Levengood became a support specialist when the specialist who had been serving her family encouraged her to try it.

"I like helping people. That can sometimes be a big fault. When my husband says we can't save everyone, I say, we can try," Levengood said only half-jokingly.

As a Foster Parent Support Specialist, Levengood also feels the strain of only being able to help so far. She can help caregivers understand DCFS regulations and manage the expectations on foster parents, but she does not make the rules.

"I feel that I work best as a mediator between the caseworkers and caregivers. I am in the office so I see what workers have to deal with and I know what it takes to be a foster parent. I try to enlighten either side to what the other may be thinking," she said.

She makes a point of participating in PRIDE training sessions so she can share her double-sided perspective with prospective foster



and adoptive parents. She also facilitates a support group for foster and adoptive families.

"We have a good community that fills in the gaps. The church that hosts our support group donates space. The congregation hosts a holiday party for DCFS foster families," said Levengood.

Being the "broker" of services between DCFS, the community and foster families, she feels hopeful about helping families succeed. She also gains encouragement from her own family. After nearly 20 years of setting boundaries and upholding consequences she says she is proud that her older children are responsible, respectful and their sometimes stubbornness can even be a benefit. Now her biggest challenge is to figure out how to finally get the last toddler potty-trained.

Livingston Co. offers more psych services

Youth who live in Livingston County or see a county physician can take part in the Rural Children's Mental Health Program, implemented by the Livingston County Mental Health Board. A child and adolescent psychiatrist and a child psychologist will provide mental health services to youth ages 3 to 18 through the Institute for Human Resources. This Medicaid-certified provider will be able to bill Medicaid, the Department of Human Services or private insurance.

No one will ever be refused services because of their inability to pay. This program, funded by the Livingston County Mental Health Board and a federal grant, brings to a rural area services that have previously been available only in large cities.

Central Connections

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Anyone can call the regional reporter with foster parent association news and schedules; local training notices; features on foster families and community members working for children; photos; and ideas for news articles or supportive services that would be helpful for caregivers to know.

LAN Corner: Educational support in DeWitt, Macon, and Piatt counties

In recent years, the contracts between DCFS and the Child and Adolescent Local Area Networks (LAN) service providers focused on creating programs to stabilize children in the current educational settings. These programs are available to all families, including foster, adoptive and guardianship families concerned about students at risk of truancy, suspension or expulsion. For more information about LANs, contact Greg Hixon, DCFS LAN Liaison at 217-221-2525 or e-mail, greg.hixon@illinois.gov.

LAN 22 covers DeWitt, Macon, and Piatt counties. LAN 22 supports students' educational success through "wrap-around" services that identify and fund educational needs and the PASS Program, a case-management approach for students and their families.

Macon County Mental Health Board administers LAN 22 wrap-around services, which are funded by the Illinois State Board of Education and DCFS. The first step to determine what services may need to be wrapped around a youth's service plan is to convene a Child and Family Team. The Child and Family Team considers the student's and their family's existing strengths and what is needed in order to stabilize and enhance the student's educational experience. The team will look for relevant existing services or funding streams within LAN 22 before going forward with a funding

request for LAN wraparound funds. Kevin Morrison-Otis of Webster Cantrell Hall facilitates the gatekeeping committee of various community providers and stakeholders charged with reviewing the wrap-around plans. Once the gatekeeping committee approves the wrap plan, the request goes to the Macon County Mental Health Board where funding of the plan is provided.

LAN 22 also provides educational/behavioral supports to qualified students and families in the tri-county area through Webster Cantrell Hall's Family Centered Services program called PASS, which stands for Pursuing Academic Stability and Success. The PASS Program's goal is designed "to support positive behavior and academic engagement of children and youth in LAN 22 who are at risk of negative educational outcomes due to truancy, suspensions and expulsions." This program offers a comprehensive array of services, including case management, therapeutic intervention services, educational advocacy, adolescent support group, respite services, and linkages to other community agencies and resources.

Caregivers interested in developing a 'wrap plan' for a student can contact Kevin Morrison-Otis. To enroll in the PASS Program, contact Amy Still. Both are at Webster Cantrell Hall at 217-423-6961.

PRIDE training goes digital with new computerized services

The DCFS Office of Training announced that it will soon offer the in-service PRIDE training modules as an interactive CD-ROM format in addition to the traditional classroom format. The digital format will provide any-time, anywhere use, allowing caregivers to receive training, while working around the other responsibilities that compete to for their time.

The nine in-service modules in PRIDE Digital Curriculum use the same combination of co-trainers that are featured in all the PRIDE classroom training programs. A child welfare professional and a foster parent professional guide at-home learners through each module. Using video and an easy-to-use computer format, the computerized course presents the information and recorded discussions from other caregivers, adopted individuals and agency staff with knowledge of Illinois' child welfare system. The digital system takes learners through exercises to test their understanding of the material. It saves exercises so caregivers can document their work for each module.

DCFS continues to work with Governor's State University on this project and the plans for making the digital courseware widely available. Details will be included on the training pages of future issues of this newsletter. Contact Jean Maher of the DCFS Office training at 217-524-3539 for more information.

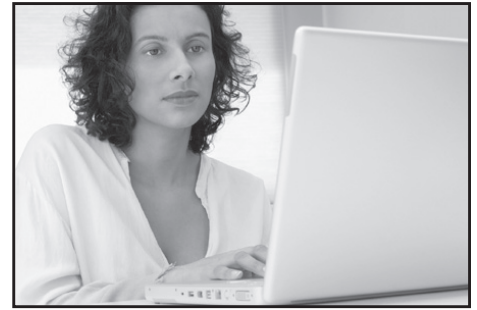
Virtual Training Center offers on-line convenience

The Virtual Training Center (VTC) is a new on-line learning resource center from the Office of DCFS Training. All caregivers, DCFS or private agency staff or other child welfare partners will be able to access the on-line training center through the Internet at www.dcfstraining.org. All training registration, current schedules, updated announcements, training transcripts, and learning resources (including the foster parent library), will ultimately be available on-line in the center. The Department is asking each licensed caregiver with both the Department and the private child welfare agencies to register for a VTC account.

With a VTC account, caregivers can see their own transcripts at any time, search for the most up-to-date schedules of classes available, and even search the foster parent library for resources. It will save time by allowing caregivers to register for training on-line using a computer. It will also make it easier for the Department to communicate updates through e-mail.

To start a VTC account, all users need to complete a VTC Training Account form, which only takes a few minutes.

1. Go to the VTC Web site, look in announcements section, and click on the link to the form.



Users can fill it out on-line and submit via e-mail, **or**

2. Complete the form on-line, print it, and fax to the Registration Unit at 217-782-9301, **or**
3. Contact the DCFS Registration Unit at 877-800-3393, and they will e-mail the form. For caregivers who don't have e-mail, the Unit can mail the form or complete it by telephone.

Even caregivers that do not have access to the Internet are still being asked to complete the personal account form to ensure an accurate training profile for them is included in the DCFS database.

The Registration Unit and toll free number 1-877-800-3393 will still be operational after the VTC has been activated. However, the VTC is the gateway to training schedules, on-line registration, accessing your transcripts, and taking on-line classes.

If you have questions, contact Mary Ochman-Ahmed by e-mail at Mary.Ochman-Ahmed@Illinois.gov or by phone, at 217-785-5689.

Central Region Training Calendar

Foster PRIDE In-Service Modules

All caregivers are welcome to attend PRIDE In-Service Training. Advance registration is required. Training dates, times and locations are subject to change.

Module 12 - Understanding and Promoting Preteen and Teen Development (6 training hours)

This new course will assist Caregivers to identify developmentally appropriate ways to best promote healthy development for preteens and teens who have experienced abuse, neglect and trauma. This six-hour module will help foster/adopt caregivers to understand the teen brain development and the impact of trauma and loss on preteens and teens. Participants will learn specific strategies that caregivers can use fostering teenagers in the day to day life of the foster family.

Bloomington *St. Patrick's Church*
Jan. 21 & 28 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

Galesburg *First Lutheran Church*
Feb. 4 & 11 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

Jacksonville *DCFS Office*
Jan. 28 & Feb. 4 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

Quincy *Blessing Hospital*
Jan 19 & 26 (Sat) 9 a.m.-Noon

Springfield *Ramada Limited North*
Jan. 19 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Urbana *Webber St. Christian Church*
Jan. 29 & 31 (Tue/Thu) 6-9 p.m.

Module 1 - Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children at Risk (12 training hours)

The focus of this module is how to build self-esteem in children, how kids act when they need recognition, power, freedom, enjoyment and to belong, and how to listen to what kids say and not what we think they say.

Jacksonville *Comfort Inn*
Jan. 15, 17, 22 & 24 6-9 p.m.
(Tue/Thu)

Module 2 - Using Discipline to Protect, Nurture and Meet Developmental Needs (9 training hours)

This workshop provides practical information to foster parents about how to use effective discipline techniques such as I-messages, natural and logical consequences, time out and how to catch kids being "good" and what to do to encourage positive behavior.

Normal *BabyFold*
Feb. 5 (Tue) & 6-9 p.m.
Feb. 9 (Sat) 9 a.m.-Noon

Urbana *Webber St. Christian Church*
Jan. 24 & 31, 6:30-9:30 p.m.
Feb. 7 (Thu)

Educational Advocacy

6 training hrs.

It is mandatory for one foster parent in each family to attend Educational Advocacy Training in order to be re-licensed. Educational Advocacy Training is offered following each Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE training and many additional times. This six-hour course covers information foster parents need to know so that they can advocate for their foster children's educational rights and needs.

Danville *Public Library*
Jan. 5 & 12 (Sat) 9 a.m.-Noon

Macomb *Holiday Inn Express*
Dec. 4 & 11 (Tue) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

Normal *BabyFold*
Dec. 20 (Thu) & 6:30-9:30 p.m.
Dec. 22 (Sat) 9 a.m. - Noon

Peoria *Proctor Hospital*
Dec. 17 & 19 (Mon & Wed) 6-9 p.m.

Peru *LaQuinta Inn*
Jan. 7 & 14 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

Quincy *Blessing Hospital*
Dec. 11 & 13 (Tue/Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

St. Joseph *Illini Christian Ministries*
Dec. 10 & 17 (Mon) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

Child Trauma

4 training hrs.

This four-hour course helps caregivers recognize the signs of trauma and understand how to work with children who have experienced traumatic events.

Bloomington *Eastland Suites* **Peoria** *Counseling & Family Svcs.*
Dec. 1 (Sat) 9 a.m.-1 p.m. April 5 (Sat) 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Bloomington *Doubletree Hotel* **Quincy** *Blessing Hospital*
March 8 (Sat) 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Jan. 12 (Sat) 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Caregivers must register to attend any of these training classes.

Call the DCFS Office of Training

877-800-3393
toll free